Q & A with Gina Duncan, Executive Director of Fondation Enfant Jesus

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FEJ school children being taught how to properly brush their teeth and learning why it's important.

Fondation Enfant Jesus (FEJ) is the non-profit organization that will own and run USGBC's Project Haiti Orphanage & Children's Center. Project Haiti is being rebuilt in the earthquake-stricken Port-au-Prince's Delmas 41 neighborhood and its impact will go far beyond the walls of the building. The LEED Platinum facility will educate the Haitian people on how to rebuild back better and will provide a safe place for those who need it most. FEJ is dedicated to creating a nurturing and loving environment that educates both children and parents, offers pathways to adoption and provides medical support to those in need.

Who benefits from the work of FEJ?

First of all and most importantly, the children who receive care at our orphanages and schools benefit from our work. These children are most at risk and in the poorest communities. The community itself also benefits. We work closely with the women in the community who are the mothers of the children, we provide education and we set a positive example. We are really proud of the example we are setting for the rest of the country on what is possible.

What is your proudest accomplishment thus far?

As far as FEJ is concerned, our proudest moments have been centered on uniting families and promoting education in everything we do. The impact of education through our school program, health clinics and promotion of education in all its facets is at the core and essence of change and progress. We've taken the time to understand that education is the true catalyst for change.

One example I am particularly proud of is that of a young woman who was in an arranged relationship – she was essentially sold by her family to be a domestic slave in another home. She was raped and impregnated by the head of that household and had her first child at age 13. By 17, she had already had her third child. She was being brutally beaten by the man of the house and finally ran away and found herself in our compound seeking refuge. She was essentially a child taking care of three children, and when she came in she was desperate. Her first reaction was to try and give us her children and place them under adoption. We felt that wasn't best for her.

I asked her, "What are your dreams for you and your children?" I realized she didn't know she could have dreams and she needed to be empowered and educated. I encouraged her to participate in our educational programs and to take part in different workshops about parenting, hygiene, nutrition, self esteem, rights as a woman, how to manage finances and how to discover her talents.

After she had been with us a while we received a donation to build one house in the community. We started a contest through our women's program to have each woman share their dreams, tell us how a new home would change their lives and what it meant for their future. This woman really loved children and said she would like to work with them. She had a natural talent. She won the contest and we helped her build her new house. She had to supervise, participate, learn and engage in the entire building process. At first, she looked at me with anger because it was a lot of work, but in my heart I knew her building her own home herself was the right thing for her to do. When it was built, she was so appreciative and had so much pride in her house. Our program and the education she received changed this woman's life, gave her purpose and made a huge transformation.

She now has a home, is involved with her kids' education and is a responsible 21-year-old adult. She thanks me often for giving her this push and asks what

she can do for me. I told her to keep doing what she's doing, keep learning. A little bit of education transformed this woman and helped her blossom.

Following the earthquake in 2010, FEJ's Port au Prince location was completely destroyed. Why is it so important that you rebuild this Center in the same location?

FEJ's work is all about the community and Port au Prince has great needs. This is the location that housed our central office and administration, including social workers, a pediatrician and medical staff, and it provided education and allowed us to coordinate adoptions and take care of children efficiently. It's especially helpful and cost efficient to be near the government agencies rather than in the small villages when dealing with adoption. When we rebuild, we will reopen our healthcare space for triage to stabilize children in need. Many of these children come in critical, malnourished conditions and with parasites and we often don't know their complete physical state right away.

When USGBC came to you with the idea of rebuilding the Center and creating a LEED Platinum facility, what was your initial reaction?

Right after the earthquake, we knew we needed help, but we didn't know where to start or how to rebuild. For me, it was a God send when USGBC came to us. When I met everyone from the USGBC and HOK team, especially Roger Limoges (USGBC's Lead for Project Haiti), and I learned about what the organization represented, it was such an honor to have everyone helping us.

We feel privileged to be chosen. The team working on this project is professional and multifaceted and so sensitive to the culture and community. Everything has been thought through, from the culture, to the security, to the needs of the children. The sustainability factor for a non-profit like ours is a huge advantage and opportunity to save money, and many other organizations will learn from us. In a culture like Haiti, sustainability should not be a luxury but an essential part of how we as Haitains should be building. I saw right away that this is bigger than just building an orphanage. It's a model for young Haitian designers, architects and builders to emulate.

For those who may never have the opportunity to travel to Haiti or meet the Haitian people, what would you like our readers to know about the community and people?

I believe the future of Haiti is in jeopardy as the country is not sensitive enough to the needs of the children. They are so vulnerable but so welcoming. You never see a child without a smile, reaching out for hope, even when they are in pain. The Haitian population in general is very young. The children and young mothers inspire me and they desire to have a better life. They look to us all for help.

What happened to Haiti after the earthquake helped us realize people around the world do care and Haitians aren't alone, but the initial support has been fading away and we still need so much help. I worry about Haiti being forgotten at a critical time and I hope people remember us and show their support. The people of Haiti have so much hope.

To learn more about Project Haiti and to make a donation, please visit www.usgbc.org/haiti.

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